

## **KINGS, BOOKS OF**

The closing part of the narrative which begins in Genesis and focuses on the story of Israel from her origins in Egypt to the ending of her political independence by the Babylonians. The division of the books of Kings from the books of Samuel is an artificial one, as is the further division of Kings itself into two books, which was introduced by the LXX.

### **I. Outline of contents**

Kings consists of an account of the Israelite monarchy written from a theological perspective and taking the history from its high point in the united monarchy to its low point in the Exile.

- (a) The reign of Solomon (1 Kings 1-11): his accession (1-2), his successes (3-10), his failures (11).
- (b) The divided kingdom (1 Kings 12-2 Kings 17): Judah under Rehoboam, and the majority N tribes under Jeroboam who retain the title Israel, separate from each other. Israel comes under considerable pagan influence from the beginning and experiences many bloody coups before finally being exiled. Judah is less paganized, though only preserved because of Yahweh's faithfulness to his promise to David. The prophets Elijah and Elisha are heavily involved especially in the story of Israel.
- (c) The kingdom of Judah (2 Kings 18-25): despite the reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah, the paganizing policy of Manasseh finally bears fruit in the fall of Judah too. But the conclusion of the books sound a possible note of hope (25:27-30).

### **II. Origin**

The last event to which Kings refers is the exiled king Jehoiachin's release from prison in Babylon in 561 (2 Kings 25:27), and clearly the books in their final form must come from after this time. There may be elsewhere hints of even later situations: notably, the dating of the building of the Temple (1 Kings 6:1) perhaps reflects a chronological scheme which places that event midway between the Exodus and the rebuilding of the Temple after the Exile.

The main composition of the work is to be dated earlier, however. This may have been in the early years of the Exile (P. R. Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration*, OTL, 1968, ch. 5). Alternatively, it may have been after the release of Jehoiachin in 561 (R. K. Harrison, *IOT*, 1970, pp. 730f., following M. Noth). Another view dates the 'first edition' of Kings in the reign of Josiah (J. Gray, *I and II Kings*, OTL, 1970). But while much of the material in Kings dates from long before the Exile, and some reflects its pre-exilic perspective, the evidence for an actual 'first edition' of Kings in the reign of Josiah, or for a pre-Deuteronomistic earlier version of the history, is scant.

Any pre- or post-exilic work on the books must have taken place in Palestine. Work during the exilic period itself might have taken place in Babylon or Palestine (the arguments for each location are discussed by Ackroyd, pp. 65-68 and by E. W. Nicholson, *Preaching to the Exiles: A Study of the Prose Tradition in the Book of Jeremiah*, 1970, pp. 117-122).

We do not know the names of the author(s) of Kings, though the group which was responsible for the work is often described as the 'Deuteronomists'. This description reflects the view that Kings is not merely the last part of the story begun in Genesis; it is more specifically the last part of the 'Deuteronomistic history', which begins with the Book of Deuteronomy. On this view, the story from Joshua to Kings, known in the Hebrew Bible as the 'Former Prophets', has been written or edited as a whole to show how principles declared in Deuteronomy worked out in Israel's history from the conquest, via the period of the judges and the united monarchy, to the Exile. The view usually presupposes a belief that Deuteronomy itself was written in the late pre-exilic period, though it need not involve this. It is to be noted, however, that the emphases of the Deuteronomic law by no means coincide with those of Kings. On the one side, the humanitarian, social and moral concerns of Deuteronomy are not reflected in Kings. Conversely, while Deuteronomy stresses the central sanctuary (though without referring explicitly to Jerusalem) and refers to the monarchy (though without ascribing to it the theological significance it receives in Judah), these do not have the importance they receive in Kings.

### **III. Literary characteristics**

The formal structure of Kings is provided by a reign-by-reign treatment of the history. During the period of the divided monarchy, the accounts of N and S kings are allowed to interweave in order to preserve a broadly chronological treatment. Each king is summarily described and evaluated according to a fairly consistent pattern, which may be perceived by examining the short accounts of the reign of Jehoshaphat (1 Kings 22:41-50) or Amon (2 Kings 21:19-26). Usually, however, this summary description and evaluation is the framework within which other material is enclosed, so that its opening and closing elements may be separated by several chapters (see, *e.g.*, the account of the reign of Hezekiah, 2 Kings 18-20). Thus the accounts of Solomon, Rehoboam, Ahab, Jehoram, Jehu and Joash, for instance, include considerable narrative material centring on royal and political matters. Other narratives centre on prophets, especially Elijah, Elisha and Isaiah. Sometimes these prophets are involved in royal and political matters (revealingly, however, the Israelite king is not even named in 2 Kings 5-7: he is not the real centre of interest). Other narratives concern the prophets' personal lives and ministries (*e.g.* 2 Kings 4). The 'Deuteronomistic' perspective of the work as a whole is expounded most systematically in Kings in an extensive theological comment which closes off the history of the N kingdom (2 Kings 17).

Various views are held as to the historical value of Kings. Clearly it is no attempt to write 'objective' or 'critical' history of a post-Enlightenment kind. It is history with a message, and the events it relates are chosen in accordance with their relevance to the message. It is thus not a political history, and some periods of great political significance (such as the reign of Omri) are passed over relatively briefly because they are of little significance in relation to the writer's concern with the history of Israel's relationship with Yahweh.

Within the Deuteronomistic framework, however, material of recognized historical value is included. The summary frameworks refer the reader to 'the book of the acts of Solomon' and to the annals of the kings of Judah and of Israel for further information on the various reigns, and it seems likely that these were the sources of many of the bare historical facts passed on by Kings (such as the name of a king's mother and the brief references to specific events). Complex chronological problems are raised by the dates provided for the kings (one basic solution for these

is provided by E. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, 1965). Beyond these royal annals, it is widely accepted that 1 Kings 1-2 forms the original ending of an account of how Solomon came to the throne, which extends back at least to 2 Sa. 9. As for the other narratives incorporated into Kings, Gray (for instance) accepts the fundamental historical value both of the material more concerned with political and military events and that concerned with the prophets, though he regards the more personal stories about Elijah and Elisha in 1 Kings 17 and 2 Kings 1-6 as folkloristic, in part simply because of the miraculous element in them. But the precise nature of the author's sources, beyond the royal annals to which they actually refer, is not clear (*cf.* Gray, pp. 14-35). Considerable archaeological material from the Iron Age in Israel and Judah is relevant to Kings.

The authors' method of composition means that their work is not a smooth literary whole, but it both gives us access to the material they pass on from their sources in a largely unredacted form, and impresses a degree of unity on the whole by the distinctive framework in which they set this material. Sometimes the source material, or the collected form of a section of the material, may fruitfully be treated by a literary critical approach, and this is likely to be a subject of increasing study (*Semeia* 3, 1975; 8, 1977).

The text of Kings in MT presents relatively few problems. But the Qumran discoveries (combined with evidence from Chronicles and the LXX) have implications for the state of the pre-MT textual traditions of Kings, as of other books .

#### **IV. Emphases**

(a) We have noted that Kings begins at the high point of the period covered by the Deuteronomistic history, the united monarchy. The fact that this is the high point reflects the importance of the Davidic monarchy and the Temple of Solomon. Yahweh's commitment to David (2 Sa. 7:11-16) is often referred to by Yahweh and by the narrator as the explanation for Yahweh's faithfulness to Judah and to David's successors (1 Kings 6:12; 11:12-13, 36; 2 Kings 8:19; 19:34), and David's loyalty to Yahweh is frequently (and slightly surprisingly) a standard by which later kings are judged (*e.g.* 1 Kings 9:4; 2 Kings 22:2). But the repercussions of one king's reign in later times can also be negative: the sins of Manasseh are ultimately the cause of the Exile (2 Kings 24:3-4). Thus the well-being of the people as a whole is tied up with the behavior of the king (2 Kings 21:11-15).

The building of the Temple is the climax of the opening chapters of Kings. 1 Kings 8 focuses the Kings' theology of the Temple, which is the dwelling-place of Yahweh's name. W. Eichrodt (*Theology of the OT*, 2, 1967, pp. 23-45) sees Yahweh's name as the most sophisticated OT form of 'the spiritualization of the theophany'—a way of talking of the real revelatory presence of God without compromising his transcendence. The importance of the Temple makes it a crucial touchstone for the evaluation of the kings. Jeroboam I is condemned for devising alternative places and forms of worship for the N kingdom (1 Kings 12-13), and his successors are condemned for continuing to have recourse to these; Josiah, the antitype to Jeroboam, appearing near the end of the story as Jeroboam appears near its beginning, is commended for his reform of temple worship and for his destruction of high places generally and of the shrine at Bethel in particular (2 Kings 22-23).

(b) Kings' attitude to the monarchy and to the Temple, however, shows that these are not to be seen as absolutes. They are subject, first of all, to the Torah. 'The Deuteronomist sees the main problem of the history of Israel as lying in the question of the correct correlation of Moses and David' (G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1, 1968, p. 339). The Davidic promise can be relied on only as long as the Mosaic covenant demand is accepted. Thus the great villain of the story of Judah in Kings is Manasseh; the list of his acts corresponds closely to what Deuteronomy says Israel should not do (cf. 2 Kings 21:2-9 with Dt. 17:2-4; 18:9-12). Conversely in the story of its great hero Josiah, Kings emphasizes the significance of his discovery of the 'book of the covenant' by giving it first mention in its account of his reign (contrast the account in 2 Ch. 34), and the list of his acts corresponds closely to what Deuteronomy says Israel should do. Thus the requirements and sanctions of the Torah (specifically of Deuteronomy) provide the principles for understanding Israel's history. When kings obeyed the Torah (especially its demand for faithful worship at the central shrine), they generally prospered. When they ignored it, they did not.

But the spoken word of the prophet is thought of as succeeding and supporting the written word of Moses (cf. the role of Huldah in the discovery of the lawbook in 2 Kings 22:13-20), and also demanding the attention of king and people. 'What fascinated [the Deuteronomist] was, we might say, the functioning of the divine word in history' (cf. 1 Kings 8:24) (G. von Rad, *The Deuteronomistic Theology of History in the Books of Kings*', in *Studies in Deuteronomy*, SBT 9, 1961, p. 91). Thus Kings pictures 'a course of history which was shaped and led to a fulfilment by a word of judgment and salvation continually injected into it' (von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1, p. 344). This point is made by including lengthy stories about various prophets, especially as regards their involvement in the nation's political life. 'In the decisive political events the initiative stems from prophets, who 'change the gears of history with a word of God' (*ibid.*, p. 342). It is also made by criss-crossing the story with prophecies and their fulfilment (e.g. 1 Kings 11:29-39 and 12:15; 1 Kings 13:1-10 and 2 Kings 13:15-18; 2 Kings 20:16-17 and 24:13). The stress on how true prophecies were fulfilled may reflect concern with the problem of false prophecy during the Exile. Thus a king's attitude to the prophet's word forms another index of his attitude to God (Hezekiah, Josiah).

(c) One of the characteristic emphases of the covenant as expounded in Deuteronomy is that God blesses those who are faithful to him but brings trouble to those who disobey him (Dt. 28-30). Thus in Kings the material concerning Solomon's reign is arranged so that Solomon's setbacks are seen as consequences of his association with foreign women (1 Kings 11). On the other hand, Kings recognises that God's justice does not work out in this way in every reign. Manasseh enjoys a long reign, and his apostasy only brings its fruit decades later (2 Kings 21; 24: 1- 4). Josiah is responsive to Yahweh's word, but dies an early and tragic death (2 Kings 23:29).

## **V. Message and purpose**

The function of Kings' review of the history which led up to the Exile is to explain why the Exile came about and to express an admission that there was ample cause for God to judge Israel. It is a form of confession, or 'an act of praise at the justice of the judgment of God'; 'this statement with its apparent lack of hope for the future lays the only possible foundation for the future'

(Ackroyd, p. 78, following von Rad) because it throws the people of God totally back on the grace of God.

The possibility of hope for the future is hinted at in the way the theological emphases of Kings, described above, remain open to the future. Perhaps God's commitment to David still holds: it may be that the release of Jehoiachin, related in the final paragraph of Kings, makes this hope explicit. Although the Temple has been pillaged and burnt, prayer is still possible in the Temple, or towards it on the part of people who are cut off from it, and God has undertaken to hear such prayer (see 1 Kings 8-9). Although judgment has come in accordance with the sanctions of the covenant, the same covenant allows for the possibility of repentance and restoration after judgment (see 1 Kings 8:46-53; cf. Dt. 30). Although the prophetic words which Israel ignored form a further reason for her punishment, the fact that those prophetic words of judgment have come true may encourage the hope that the prophetic promises of restoration (e.g. those of Jeremiah) may come true, too.

Thus the aim of Kings is in part didactic, 'to present the divine view of Israelite history' (R. K. Harrison, p. 722). Beyond this, there are at least hints of the kerygmatic (cf. E. W. Nicholson, p. 75). Kings does open up the possibility of there being a future. On the basis of this possibility it further seeks to be paraenetic, in that it implicitly challenges the generation of the Exile to turn back to Yahweh in repentance, faith and commitment to obedience (cf. 1 Kings 8:46-50). For 'the judgment of 587 did not mean the end of the people of God; nothing but refusal to turn would be the end' (von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1, p. 346).

## VI. Context and implications

Kings is thus one of the several responses to the fall of Judah and the Exile. It bears comparison especially with \* Lamentations (five psalms which express the feelings and tentative hopes of people in Judah after the fall of Jerusalem) and with the book of Jeremiah (whose material was collected and assembled in this same period and manifests many literary and theological points of contact with Kings; see E. W. Nicholson, *op. cit.*). Kings may also be studied in the light of parallel treatments of events it narrates as these appear in Chronicles, Isaiah and Jeremiah (see, e.g., B. S. Childs, 'Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis', *SET* 2. 3, 1967).

In a volume of expositions of passages from 2 Kings, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* (1972, pp. 13-21), J. Ellul suggests that Kings makes a twofold distinctive contribution to the Canon of Scripture. First, it pictures God's involvement in political life, and thus warns both against undervaluing the importance of politics, and against absolutizing this realm (since it shows how God brings judgment on politics). Secondly, it displays the interplay of the free determination of man (who in various political situations makes his decisions and puts his policies into effect) and the free decision of God (who nevertheless effects his will through or despite these deliberate human acts).

In reaction to an overstress in recent biblical study on the idea of God as the one who acts in history, the importance of this motif in the Bible is in danger of being under-stressed. Kings is a book which itself particularly emphasizes this motif (see J. E. Goldingay, 'That you may know that Yahweh is God': A study in the relationship between theology and historical truth in the

Old Testament', *TynB* 23, 1972, pp. 58-93; and on the application of this idea today, see D. N. Freedman, 'The biblical idea of history', *Int* 21, 1967, pp. 32-49). God is one who works out a purpose in history, and his people may use the marks of his footsteps in past history to see what he may be doing in the present.